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SUBJECT: TOP REBEL: THE RETURN OF IYAD AG GHALI

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    1B. BAMAKO 00902  
    1C. BAMAKO 00901  
    1D. BAMAKO 00482  
    1E. IIR 6 958 0118 08

Classified By: Political Officer Aaron Sampson, Embassy Bamako, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

1.(C) Summary: Recent meetings with Tuareg rebel Alliance for Democracy and Change (ADC) spokesman Ahmada ag Bibi in Bamako and civilian and military leaders in Kidal provided more insight into the impact of Tuareg rebel leader Iyad ag Ghali's return to Mali. President Amadou Toumani Toure appears to have taken a calculated risk by recalling ag Ghali from his one year sabbatical with the Malian consulate in Djeddah, Saudi Arabia. Ag Ghali's return shuffled the balance of power in Kidal, re-energized a stalled peace process, and may have prevented Bahanga from resuming hostilities - at least for now - against the Malian military.

The price President Toure will ultimately pay in terms of concessions or crisis management should his ag Ghali gamble fail remains unclear. Tuareg leaders now see Bahanga's participation as indispensable to Algiers Accords implementation. Neither the Tuaregs nor Mali appear any closer to constituting any mixed military units as stipulated by the Accords. The next sign post for peace negotiations appears to be a mid-December meeting in Kidal between the Malian government and Tuareg rebel leaders including ag Ghali and Bahanga. Meanwhile the increasingly frail traditional leader - or Amenokal - of Kidal Tuaregs, Intallah ag Attaher, was reportedly in fair condition at a private clinic in Bamako following a December 3 operation to treat a leg infection. Ag Attaher has been Kidal's Amenokal since 1963. End Summary.

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The Tuareg Files: Ag Bibi Benched  
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2.(C) The Embassy met with National Assembly Deputy and ADC spokesman Ahmada ag Bibi on December 2 to discuss Tuareg rebel leader Iyad ag Ghali's return to Mali to manage what many Malians refer to simply as the "Tuareg File." President Toure recalled ag Ghali in late November, then dispatched him to Kidal on November 27 to negotiate the release of four Malian officers still held captive by dissident Tuareg rebel leader Ibrahim Bahanga (Ref. A). Providing further evidence of ag Bibi's shrinking stature within the ADC, ag Bibi told the Embassy he believed ag Ghali had returned to Bamako on December 1 with one or two liberated soldiers, but couldn't be sure because ag Ghali had yet to contact him and the information ag Bibi had acquired was filtered through fellow National Assembly Deputy and apparent ag Ghali confidant Alghabass ag Intallah. We subsequently confirmed that ag Ghali returned to Bamako on December 1 with only one of Bahanga's four remaining prisoners.

3.(C) Asked whether the ADC had changed course and sought once again to involve Bahanga in talks with Mali and Algerian mediators, Ag Bibi described an internal debate within the ADC. Like ag Ghali, ag Bibi said Bahanga needed to be part of the Algiers Accords process but added that if Bahanga were to return to the Algiers framework, it should be on Mali, the ADC, and Algeria's terms. "We," said ag Bibi in reference to the ADC, "are working with the Malians and the Algerians. Bahanga has no plan for the Tuaregs. All he wants to do is attack."

4.(C) Ag Bibi told the Embassy that he met with Bahanga on November 10 in Bourghessa in northern Mali, just days after Bahanga's return from Libya. During this meeting, Bahanga proposed renewed attacks against the Malian military. Ag Bibi said he convinced not Bahanga but some members of Bahanga's entourage to remain calm and avoid provoking the Malian army or derailing the Algiers Accords. Ag Bibi complained that even fellow Tuaregs could not understand Bahanga, that Bahanga speaks neither French nor Arabic fluently and has trouble simply expressing himself clearly in Tamachek.

5.(C) Ag Bibi also lent support to the idea, raised by ag Ghali previously, of blanket amnesty for individuals implicated in hostilities that occurred after the signing of the July 2006 Algiers Accords. Ag Bibi said amnesty would enable Tuareg rebels to return to Kidal and would also provide Mali with a face-saving way of extricating itself from entanglements created by the April 10 executions of Barka ag Cheikh and Mohammed ag Moussa in Kidal. Ag Bibi said there was no chance Mali would ever investigate the

BAMAKO 00000932 002 OF 004

murders. "I know how things work in African countries," said Ag Bibi. Since Tuareg rebels suspect the Malian military officers still held by Bahanga of involvement in the executions, an amnesty agreement for Tuareg fighters could possibly open a door to liberating Bahanga's remaining prisoners as well.

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Kidal Still Largely Deserted  
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6.(C) The town of Kidal appeared largely deserted during a December 3-5 visit by the Embassy. In June 2008 the head of the Malian Red Cross in Kidal estimated that 70 to 80 percent of city's residents fled following the April 10 executions of Barka ag Cheikh and Mohamed ag Moussa. Local leaders now claim that much of the population has returned. To an outside observer, however, Kidal still appears largely deserted, with few people on the streets or in the market during the day and no evident noise, lights, traffic or pedestrians visible after dark. The unusually cold weather - night temperatures were in the mid 40s - could have explained the town's apparent emptiness. Others speculated that residents were traveling to town during the day, but sleeping in nearby desert encampments at night.

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Ag Ghali Claims Center Stage  
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7.(C) Sitting in the five-sided office - dubbed "the Pentagon" - of the newly constructed and conspicuously labeled "El Hadj Abdousalam ag Assalat Building" in downtown Kidal on December 3, local Chamber of Commerce president and ADC member Abdousalam ag Assalat explained how Ghali's return had short-circuited all other attempts to placate Bahanga. In mid-November ag Assalat contacted the Embassy to report that he was close to winning the liberation of the four Malian military officers still held by Bahanga (Ref. B). On November 22 ag Assalat and ten other Kidal leaders mostly belonging to the Taghat Melet fraction of Malian Tuaregs met with Bahanga to discuss the peace process and the fate of the

four Malian prisoners.

8.(C) According to notes drawn up by a member of the Taghat Melet delegation, ag Assalat and others urged Bahanga to liberate the hostages as good-will gesture in return for direct talks with President Toure. Bahanga initially refused, citing Mali's failure to respond to his liberation of several dozen other prisoners in September. The Taghat Melet delegation's demarche, however, was unusually compelling because Bahanga is holding the four Malians soldiers to avenge the as-yet unsolved murders of two Taghat Melet Tuaregs: ag Cheikh and ag Moussa. Ag Assalat and other Taghat Melets asked Bahanga not to hold the Malians on their behalf and encouraged Bahanga to release the four prisoners in favor of other, more constructive means of honoring the lives of ag Cheikh and ag Moussa.

9.(C) Ag Assalat said he thought Bahanga had agreed to accept the Taghat Melet request. "Then," said ag Assalat, "Iyad called." As Assalat accused ag Ghali of explicitly instructing Bahanga not to release any of the prisoners to anyone but himself. Ag Assalat said ag Ghali devised the December 1 release of just one of the four hostages to cement his position as the unchallenged leader of Tuareg rebels in Bamako and Kidal, and predicted that ag Ghali would draw out the release of the remaining three prisoners in a "drip drip" fashion in order to "reassert" his role as northern Mali's undisputed power broker.

10.(C) Ag Assalat also confirmed a report by ag Bibi that ag Ghali traveled to Kidal on November 27 with Ben Mouloud - an Arab/Songhai businessman from the town of Gao. Although this is the first time we have heard of Ben Mouloud, both ag Bibi and ag Assalat said President Toure frequently relies on Ben Mouloud to conduct unofficial negotiations with Tuareg rebels in advance of official talks normally led by Minister of Territorial Administration, General Kafougouna Kone.

11.(C) In addition to negotiating with Bahanga, ag Ghali and Ben Mouloud also initiated preparations for an upcoming meeting between the Malian government and Tuareg rebels (including ag Ghali and Bahanga) in Kidal. Ag Assalat and the President of Kidal's Regional Assembly, Intahmadou ag Albacher, both said a meeting was tentatively set for the days following the December 8 holiday of Tabaski. Minister Kone is expected to represent the Malian government. Ag Albacher said ag Ghali's unexpected return to Mali derailed the plan, reportedly reached during the last meeting of the

BAMAKO 00000932 003 OF 004

Algiers Accords oversight committee held November 15-17 in Kidal (Ref. C), for Tuareg rebel combatants to start returning to Kidal on December 2.

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April Executions and Bahanga's Firepower  
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12.(C) Ag Assalat reported that Minister of Internal Security Sadio Gassama, who traveled to Kidal for the Nov. 15-17 oversight committee meeting, privately told an assembled group of Tuareg leaders that he too believed rogue members of the Malian military were likely involved in the April 10 murders of ag Cheikh and ag Moussa. According to ag Assalat, Minister Gassama admitted that there was little the Malian government could do in terms of identifying the killers or bringing them to justice. Ag Assalat said he also regarded an eventual murder inquiry as a non-starter.

13.(C) Coaxing Bahanga back to the negotiation table could be difficult. During the November 22 meeting with Bahanga, ag Assalat and fellow members of the Taghat Melet delegation observed what ag Assalat described as a vehicle mounted heavy artillery rocket launcher with a range of 25 km. Ag Assalat said Bahanga acquired the artillery from Darfur and compared Bahanga's affinity for new weaponry to a small child with a

new toy. "He needs to try them," said ag Assalat, "like he did with the land mines."

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Mixed Units Still Theoretical  
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14.(C) Col. Elhadj Gamou, the senior Malian military commander in Kidal, appeared half-way through our December 3 meeting with ag Assalat at the "Pentagon" in Kidal. Our brief discussion with Gamou never moved beyond pleasantries. Afterwards, however, ag Assalat said Gamou's private Tuareg Imghad militia, formed in May 2008 (Ref. D), continued to operate. Ag Assalat said that as an Imghad from Gao, Gamou needed this para-military group to assure his own security and provide intelligence Tuaregs belonging to other northern fractions would withhold.

15.(C) On December 4, one of Col. Gamou's deputies, Lt. Col. Malik, unexpectedly materialized at dinner at ag Assalat's residence. LTC Malik is an Imghad Tuareg from Kidal who reportedly played a key role in calming tensions in Kidal following the April 10 murders (Ref. E). He and Col. Gamou belong to a small cadre of ethnic Tuareg senior military officers who remained loyal to the Malian government following the May 2006 attacks by Tuareg rebels on Malian military outposts in Menaka and Kidal.

16.(C) Although Malik was evidently uncomfortable speaking to the Embassy about current events in Kidal without authorization from Col. Gamou, he did offer a few observations on the status of the mixed military units stipulated by the Algiers Accords. Malik described the mixed units as no closer to fruition now than the day the Accords were signed in July 2006. He said there was no consensus within the Malian or Tuareg camps regarding who would, or could, command one or more mixed units, where these units would be based, how they would be equipped, and what missions they would undertake. Since the mixed units would presumably be comprised of non-Imghad Ifoghas Tuaregs drawn from the ranks of the ADC and Bahanga, Malik and Col. Gamou may be concerned that the creation of an eventual mixed unit could undermine their own positions within the Malian military - a intra-Tuareg consideration that presents yet another hurdle along the road to the creation of mixed military units.

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Aged Leader of Kidal Tuaregs in Bamako  
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17.(C) As momentum toward a meeting between Mali, ag Ghali, and Bahanga appeared to gather speed in Kidal, the aged traditional leader of the Kidal Tuaregs traveled to Bamako for medical care. Intallah ag Attaher became Amenokal of Kidal following Mali's first Tuareg rebellion of 1963. He injured his leg in a vehicle accident in 2005 and subsequently sought treatment in Algeria. Last week's operation was reportedly to treat an infection stemming from the 2005 accident. Although the Amenokal's power is largely symbolic, the selection of ag Attaher's eventual successor could play an important role in peace talks with the Malian government - depending on who is tapped as the next Amenokal.

Ag Attaher has three sons - Mohamed ag Intallah, Alghabass ag Intallah, and Atiyoub ag Intallah. Both Mohamed and

BAMAKO 00000932 004 OF 004

Alghabass are National Assembly Deputies. The younger Atiyoub is Mayor of Kidal. As the eldest son, Mohamed, is the obvious successor. However, Mohamed is widely regarded by fellow Tuaregs as the least intelligent and least dynamic of the trio. Middle son Alghabass, on the other hand, appears to have the charisma and leadership qualities Mohamed so evidently lacks.

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Comment: The Ag Ghali Agenda

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18.(C) Often maligned for his tendency toward the non-decision, President Toure took a calculated risk by recalling ag Ghali back to Mali. After several months of false starts and on-again, off-again negotiations, ag Ghali is the only Tuareg capable of herding - if indeed that is possible - Bahanga and the disparate Tuareg micro-rebel groups back into the ADC tent. Ag Ghali's notoriously inscrutable character, however, makes it difficult to predict the direction in which he will steer renewed talks between Mali and the Tuareg rebellion. Ag Ghali has already hinted at revisiting the text of the Algiers Accords to "relaunch" the entire agreement. Judging from recent meetings with ag Ghali, ADC members, and Tuaregs on the ground in Kidal, Bahanga is now in line for a significant speaking role in northern Mali's next act - an eventual meeting between Minister Kafoungouna Kone and Tuareg rebel leaders in Kidal. A date for this meeting has not yet been set and officials on the ground in Kidal simply said it would occur sometime after the December 8 Tabaski holiday. Ag Ghali returned to Saudi Arabia for Tabaski, but is expected back in Bamako shortly, where his first order of business may be dissuading Bahanga from testing his newly acquired rocket launchers.

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